

Tuesday, January 12, 1993 - - First Organizational Day

Speaker's Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen of the House. I appreciate the honor you have bestowed on me once again, being elected Speaker if the House is a humbling experience, and I pledge to you that I will do everything that I can to be the I can possibly be.

I would first like to welcome all of our freshman House members who are here with us officially for the first time. There are some 17 of you, not the largest freshman class I've seen, but certainly not the smallest. I've had the opportunity to meet most of you personally and to learn what your goals are for the time that we will be spending in the Tennessee House. The freshness and enthusiasm you bring to this process is like a "shot in the arm" to those of us who've been around a few years. It's just like any other age-old process, it needs a transfusion occasionally to keep it healthy and up and running.

I want to pledge to you who are new, my support, and that of all the House leadership--both Republican and Democrat. We know what you are about to go through. In fact, some of our House leaders remember very well because they were freshmen themselves just two years ago. You see, you don't have to wait till you're old and balding to get the attention of your colleagues.

If I had three suggestions for you freshmen today, they would be first to listen well--because with all the noise up here, you'll have to be smart enough to learn what to listen for.

Second, to work smart--because likely more than 1,500 bills will be filed this year, being a good legislator will require more than just working hard.

And the third, and most important thing, is to act responsibly, sometimes that's a hard one to figure out. You have to not only find out what your constituents want, but you have to find out what is best for the state as a whole, and then you have to figure out what can be passed. It's not always easy, and very seldom does anybody get a whole loaf, but that's how the process works. It's a dash of idealism, a pinch of reality and a whole lot of compromise.

And acting responsibly for the people of Tennessee will take more than a dash of reality or this session. We've got some tough issues again. And they're make tougher because they're not new issues, they've been around for awhile, and it's time we got serious about them.

You all know we passed a new education reform bill last year. Providing a quality education for every child in Tennessee is a major concern, and you know we began funding that bill through a half-cent sales tax--a temporary half-cent sales tax. That means you and I have to make a very tough decision--you and I either have to continue that half cent or let our constituents know they have basically two options--cut

out the improvements made this school year or pass a local property tax increase. It's a tough decision.

Second issue--Medicaid. I'll be honest with you, I don't know what to do with this one--and what's worse I don't know anyone who does. We've got a Medicaid program that now takes a larger chunk out of our budget than the education of our children. But it's not just numbers, there's a people side of it too. One out of every five Tennesseans is on Medicaid already. So we have to understand that we're not just talking dollars, we're affecting people. As we work here at the state level through our various legislative committees, and the new administration in Washington for some signs of relief--or at least for some direction to the states in the area of health care reform.

Third issue--ethics. Two years ago, when I was elected Speaker, I set out for this body three objectives I had for improving our campaign laws. We accomplished two of those. We tightened our conflict of interest disclosure statute and we prohibited the personal use of campaign contributions.

As all of us know from having just run a race, campaign spending has gotten out of hand. It's time we asked ourselves some serious questions about this. These are going to be the political "hot potatoes." We've got a lot in store for us. We must all listen well, work smart and act responsibly.

I want to remind you of one more thing. Two years ago, in this very spot, I noted the "cloud" of public suspicion that hung over this body. I said we had the responsibility to regain the public's trust and that it should be our first order of business. I don't want to linger on this, but I do want to say that I think the way the members of this House have conducted themselves the past two years, goes a long way in dissipating that cloud.

Thank you again for electing me for your Speaker. I ask your help during the coming year.